Sampling Traps:
How the Opportunity to Sample Experiences Reduces Hedonic Value

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ABSTRACT
Consumers often have the opportunity to sample experiences – such as by previewing portions of movies or reading excerpts from books. This type of sampling is thought to facilitate the evaluation of available alternatives, thus enabling consumers to make better consumption choices. Counter to this intuition, we propose that the opportunity to sample experiences backfires by reducing hedonic value – i.e., consumers’ enjoyment of and satisfaction with an activity that entails both the exploration and the ultimate consumption of specific experiences. We hypothesize that the opportunity to sample promotes an exploration mindset, which undermines consumers’ commitment to any of the available experiences, rendering them less likely to consume any one of them in its entirety, in turn diminishing the overall hedonic value of the activity. Moreover, this adverse effect of the opportunity to sample is attenuated when the available experiences are divisible – i.e., when they entail multiple independent parts, each of which is enjoyable in its own right. Evidence from four experiments supports this theorizing. In addition, it shows that the opportunity to sample does not backfire when complete consumption of an experience is enforced and when the activity is explicitly partitioned into a pre-commitment and a post-commitment phase.

Keywords:
sampling, experiences, search, hedonic value, exploration mindset, commitment
CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The present work advances our understanding of consumer search behavior by examining the effects of having the opportunity to sample experiences before making a consumption choice. Although search behavior based on descriptive information has been studied extensively in prior work (e.g., Diehl 2005; Griffin and Broniarczyk 2010; Häubl et al. 2010), little is known about search based on in-depth experiential information. This paper sheds light on the adverse consequences of providing consumers with the opportunity to sample – doing so reduces the overall hedonic value of the activity and the commitment to and the enjoyment of selected experiences. Second, the present research highlights the pivotal role of an exploration mindset in the search for and consumption of experiences. Exploration has been examined in the cognitive search domain, where it refers to the process of identifying available resources or alternatives that are risky but potentially beneficial in different environments (Carstensen et al. 1999; Cohen et al. 2007; Hills et al. 2010). In the context of consumer search for experiences, we conceptualize an exploration mindset as a momentary mental predisposition geared towards discovering a broader set of alternatives at the expense of engaging with a single alternative in greater depth. Moreover, we identify important downstream consequences of an exploration mindset in search of experiences – it undermines commitment to any of the available alternatives, consequently reducing the enjoyment of the activity.
As consumers, we often sample experiences before we buy them or commit to consuming them in their entirety. We read excerpts from digital books before deciding which ones to download, we sample music albums before purchasing them, and we watch trailers before choosing a movie to watch at the theatre. Due in part to technological advances, consumers’ opportunities to sample experiences before making a consumption choice have increased dramatically (Tuttle 2017; Hein 2009). The malleable and subjective nature of experiences makes it difficult to assess them based on verbal descriptions. However, sampling is typically more informative than descriptive information about experiences, and it should thus enable consumers to make better decisions. Consequently, consumers should value the opportunity to sample in this context.

To empirically validate this point, we conducted a study with 165 members of the research participation pool of a major North-American university. Participants were instructed to imagine that they were presented with a list of 10 movies that they had never heard of before, and that their task was to select one of these and watch it. Participants were then asked whether they would prefer to (1) select a movie based on a detailed description of each alternative or (2) in addition have the opportunity to sample the movies before making their final choice. The vast majority of participants (90.9%; binomial test: \( p < .001 \)) indicated that they preferred to have the opportunity to sample\(^1\). Thus, the intuition that the opportunity to sample experiences – by consuming them in part – before making a final selection is desirable appears to be widely held among consumers.

Counter to this intuition, the present research introduces a theoretical framework that suggests that the opportunity to sample experiences can backfire and in fact reduce consumers’ enjoyment of activities. Instances of detrimental effects of sampling experiences are common in

\(^{1}\) We also ran this study using a sample recruited via M-Turk and obtained similar results.
consumers’ everyday lives. We fail to enjoy a movie night when browsing numerous different episodes on Netflix yet not completing any of them; we ruin the experience of in-flight entertainment by sampling portions of several movies but not watching any of them in full by the end of the flight; we experience frustration when reading excerpts from multiple books yet fail to read any one of them in its entirety; and we undermine our enjoyment of a hiking day by exploring different trails without completing any of them. We refer to the adverse effect of having the opportunity to sample on the hedonic value of an activity as the “sampling trap.” Here, hedonic value refers to the intangible, intrinsic, and emotional utility consumers can obtain from an activity (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Bellenger, Steinberg, and Stanton 1976; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982), which manifests itself in a consumer’s enjoyment of, and satisfaction with, the experience.

This research advances our understanding of search behavior in connection with experiences that can be sampled. Consumers engage in various forms of exploration of the set of available alternatives before committing to, and eventually consuming, one product (Dellaert and Häubl 2012; Shiv and Nowlis 2004). One such form of exploratory behavior is for consumers to sample experiences – i.e., to consume portions of these products for the purpose of assessing their attractiveness. The present work shows that the opportunity to sample tends to trap consumers into a mental state characterized by an exploration mindset. Inspired by the notion of the fundamental tradeoff between exploration and exploration (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles 1999; Daw et al. 2006; Hills, Todd, and Goldstone 2010), we conceptualize an exploration mindset as a momentary mental predisposition geared towards discovering a broader set of alternatives at the expense of engaging with a single alternative in greater depth. In the context of search for experiences, we propose that being in an exploration mindset undermines consumers’ commitment to any of the available alternatives – i.e., to consume any of them in their entirety.
For many experiences, a substantial portion of the pleasure they provide is derived specifically from *completing* their consumption (e.g., seeing the end of a movie). Thus, we hypothesize that the exploration mindset induced by the opportunity to sample diminishes the enjoyment of the ultimately consumed experience via reduced commitment, rendering the activity less enjoyable.

The present research contributes to the body of prior work that has examined hedonic aspects of activities that extend over a period of time (Ariely and Carmon 2000; Ariely and Zauberman 2003; Fredrickson and Kahneman 1993; Galak and Meyvis 2011; Novemsky and Ratner 2003; Ratner and Herbst 2005; Sackett et al. 2010; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). It does so by shedding light on how the opportunity to sample experiences prior to committing to consuming (any of) them affects the overall hedonic value of an activity.

Next, we develop a theoretical framework that characterizes the sampling trap and the psychological dynamics that govern its impact on consumers’ hedonic experience. After that, we present evidence from four experiments that were designed to test this framework.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

*Sampling of Experiences*

Consumers engage in some forms of search activities before committing to one of the alternatives. They employ different strategies to learn available alternatives (Adam 2001; Hauser, Urban, and Weinberg 1993), value different product attributes (Srinivasan and Ratchford 1991), and follow different heuristics when search for an ideal alternative (Houser and Winter 2004). Moreover, the technology advancement allows consumers to engage in more comprehensive and vivid information in search for products (Lynch and Ariely 2000; Weathers, Sharma, and Wood 2007).

During product search, consumers can assess the attractiveness of an alternative they encounter based on descriptive information. In addition, they sometimes have the opportunity to
learn more about a product through sampling – i.e., by trying it or consuming a small portion of it prior to purchase. For instance, when deciding on which ice cream flavor to purchase, consumers can read descriptions of the available flavors, and they might also be able to sample some of them. Prior research has demonstrated the benefits of sampling. Compared to advertising, which provides only descriptive information, product sampling tends to increase consumers’ confidence in their purchase decisions and promote more positive product attitudes (Marks and Kamins 1988; Smith and Swinyard 1988). Moreover, sampling can motivate consumers to actively seek (rather than passively accept) product information (Hoch and Deighton 1989), lead consumers to weight experiential attributes more heavily (Wright and Lynch 1995), and shift consumers’ preference towards products that are easy to use (Hamilton and Thompson 2007).

Prior research has examined the distinction between the consumption of tangible products and experiences (Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol 2015; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). This knowledge also sheds light on how the sampling of experiences differs from the sampling of tangible products in important ways. The consumption of tangible products tends to be monotonous and homogeneous (e.g., Coke essentially tastes the same today as it did yesterday). As a consequence, the sampling of such products is highly diagnostic of their quality. By contrast, the consumption of experiences is typically non-monotonous and heterogeneous (e.g., the first day of a vacation can feel very different from the last day). Moreover, experiences have a time course that includes a beginning and an end. Consequently, the sampling of an experience – i.e., the consumption of a portion of it before committing to consuming it in its entirety – is less diagnostic than the sampling of a tangible product.

In contrast to prior work that has highlighted the benefits of sampling, this paper advances our understanding of sampling behavior by exposing its potential negative hedonic consequences. First, because sampling enables consumers to better assess how enjoyable different experiences
would be (compared to the processing of mere descriptive information), we propose that the opportunity to sample affects how consumers approach the universe of available experiences. Specifically, we hypothesize that it lures consumers into a mental state that is characterized by an *exploration mindset*, causing them to focus more on discovering experiences they are not yet familiar with than on enjoying familiar ones. This should encourage consumers to take advantage of the opportunity to sample. Moreover, since the sampling of experiences is both engaging and absorbing (Hoch 2002), and also stimulates reward seeking of similar experiences (Wadhwa, Shiv, and Nowlis 2008), it might be self-reinforcing and promote the sampling of additional experiences.

*Exploration Mindset*

Human actions are often governed by temporarily activated predispositions or cognitive procedures that determine a person’s interpretation of and response to a situation (Gollwitzer, Fujita, and Oettingen 2004; Keinan and Kivetz 2011). These are commonly referred to as “mindsets” (Armor and Taylor 2003; Ülkümen, Chakravarti, and Morwitz 2010; Wyer and Xu 2010). The momentary tendency to explore novel courses of action (rather than to exploit known ones) can be thought of as one such mindset.

Exploration refers to the process of identifying available yet unknown resources, solutions, activities, or information (Cohen, McClure, and Yu 2007; Hills, Todd, and Goldstone 2010; Wilson et al. 2014). When making decisions in unfamiliar contexts, individuals can allocate their limited cognitive resources either to the exploration of unknown domains or to the exploitation of known ones. Prior research has examined how people manage the tradeoff between exploration and exploitation under different circumstances, and it has identified various factors that encourage exploration, such as the expected reward associated with search (Daw et al. 2006), the familiarity of the environment (Cohen, McClure, and Yu 2007), and the perceived abundance of
time (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles 1999).

We propose that the tradeoff between exploration and exploitation is important for understanding how consumers search for experiences. When multiple candidate experiences (that they are unfamiliar with) are available to consumers, they must strike a balance in allocating their time and cognitive resources to either continuing to consume an experience or discovering additional (potentially more enjoyable) alternatives. In the context of consumer search for experiences, we conceptualize an exploration mindset as a momentary mental predisposition geared towards discovering available yet unknown alternatives at the expense of engaging in greater depth with a single alternative that is already known.

**Commitment to Experiences**

We propose that an exploration mindset reduces a consumer’s commitment to any one experience. When searching for experiences, the overall activity should comprise two phases – a pre-commitment phase in which a consumer identifies a preferred alternative and a post-commitment phase in which s/he enjoys the selected experience. While the opportunity to sample allows a consumer to better assess available experiences, it promotes an exploration mindset that prioritizes the sampling of multiple unknown alternatives over engaging with a known one. Therefore, we argue that an exploration mindset leads a consumer to defer the decision to commit to the currently-sampled experience, and to (switch to and) sample other available experiences instead. Moreover, the opportunity to sample allows one to consume portions of experiences while exploring which experience to ultimately consume. As a consequence, the exploration mindset that is induced by the opportunity to sample blurs the boundary between the pre-commitment phase and the post-commitment phase of an activity, in turn undermining a consumer’s commitment to any of the available experiences.
One behavioral consequence of a reduced commitment to an experience is that a consumer becomes less likely to actually complete it. For many types of experiences, completion is critical to consumers’ enjoyment (e.g., seeing the end of a movie). In turn, the failure to consume a selected experience in its entirety diminishes a consumer’s enjoyment of that experience. Many activities consist of a combination of exploring what to consume and actually consuming the preferred alternative. For instance, consumers might sample portions of multiple movies on Netflix as part of a movie night at home, or they might drive through several different regions of Ireland as they determine where to spend most of their vacation. Although exploration serves an important role in hedonic consumption, the overall hedonic value of an activity is driven primarily by the enjoyment of the experiences that are actually consumed (Alba and Williams 2013; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Therefore, through a reduction in commitment, an exploration mindset decreases the enjoyment of selected experiences, which ultimately diminishes the overall hedonic value of the activity.

Based on this theorizing, we propose that offering consumers the opportunity to sample creates a trap for them. Specifically, the opportunity to sample experiences promotes an exploration mindset, which undermines consumers’ commitment to consuming selected experiences. In turn, this reduces consumers’ enjoyment of selected experiences, ultimately diminishing the overall hedonic value of an activity that comprises multiple (explored and/or consumed) experiences. These predictions are summarized in the theoretical model shown in figure 1.
In what follows, we present evidence from four experiments that were designed to test this theorizing. Experiment 1 demonstrates the negative effect of the opportunity to sample candidate experiences on the overall hedonic value of an activity, and it sheds light on the psychological dynamics that govern it. Experiment 2 establishes a key boundary condition by showing that the adverse effect of the opportunity to sample vanishes when the available experiences entail numerous small parts that are all enjoyable in their own right. Experiment 3 further corroborates the pivotal role of commitment to selected experiences as the key driver of how the opportunity to sample influences an activity’s overall hedonic value. Finally, the results of experiment 4 show that explicitly partitioning an activity into a pre-commitment and a post-
commitment phase eliminates the detrimental effect of the opportunity to sample on hedonic value.

**EXPERIMENT 1: DEMONSTRATION OF THE SAMPLING TRAP**

The objective of Experiment 1 was to provide a first demonstration of the hypothesized adverse effect of the opportunity to sample candidate experiences on the overall hedonic value of an activity. In addition, this experiment was designed to yield initial evidence of the mechanism underlying this effect, testing our prediction that the opportunity to sample promotes an exploration mindset, which reduces hedonic value by undermining consumers’ commitment to and enjoyment of selected experiences.

**Method**

*Participants and Design.* A total of 90 undergraduate students at a major North-American research university participated in this experiment ($M_{\text{Age}} = 19.79$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 1.57$; 62.2% females). They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a single-factor (opportunity to sample: no vs. yes) between-subjects design.

*Procedure.* The experiment was computer-based and conducted in a university research laboratory. Participants were presented with a set of 10 unfamiliar animation videos (each roughly 7 minutes in length), and their task was to select and watch the video they thought they would enjoy the most. They were informed that they could stop this video-watching activity whenever they liked – by clicking a button labeled “I’m Done with the Video-Watching Part of the Study,” which would advance them to the next study they were to complete. Participants inspected the available videos one at a time, and they were able to navigate between videos by clicking prominently displayed left and right arrows. (See appendix A for a sample screen shot.)

In both conditions, some standard descriptive information (i.e., title, director, and a synopsis of the storyline) was available for each of the 10 videos. In the no-sampling condition,
this verbal description was presented below a static image that was randomly taken from the video. Participants were free to examine descriptions of videos until they were ready to select the one they wanted to watch (by clicking a button labeled “Watch this Video”). As soon as they had made their selection, the video started in a player that took the place of the static image, and the navigation arrows disappeared. In the opportunity-to-sample condition, each of the videos started playing automatically on the screen that contained its verbal description, and it continued to play until participants switched to another video using one of the navigation arrows. In this condition, the opportunity to switch among videos was present throughout the entire video-watching activity.

*Measures.* The key dependent variable – the hedonic value of the video-watching activity – was measured immediately after completion of the activity via two items. Participants reported their overall enjoyment of, and satisfaction with, the entire video-watching activity on an 11-point scale (0 = not at all, 10 = very much; Cronbach’s alpha = .97).

Participants’ exploration mindset was measured on an 11-point bipolar scale asking them to indicate the relative importance of discovering additional videos versus completing the selected one during the video-watching activity (0 = enjoying the selected video, 10 = discovering additional videos). Commitment to the selected video was operationalized as the proportion of their selected video that participants watched. In the opportunity-to-sample condition, we treated the video that participants spent the most time watching as their selected video2. Finally, participants’ enjoyment of their selected video was measured using an 11-point scale (0 = not enjoyable at all, 10 = very enjoyable).

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2 An alternative approach would be to treat the last video that participants watched in the opportunity-to-sample condition as their selected video. This yields the same substantive findings as our approach – in all experiments. In most instances, the video watched last is the one watched for the longest period of time. Details are available upon request.
We tracked participants’ exploration behavior in connection with the set of videos during the watching activity – i.e., their inspection of the descriptions (no-sampling condition) or their sampling of the videos (opportunity-to-sample condition). Specifically, we recorded the duration of each participant’s overall video-watching activity, how much of that time was spent exploring the alternatives (i.e., until s/he started watching the selected video), the number of alternatives explored, and the average exploration time per alternative.

Results

Hedonic Value of the Video-Watching Activity. The opportunity to sample significantly reduced the overall hedonic value of the video-watching activity ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 7.74, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 2.07$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 6.74, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 2.25$; $t(88) = 2.17, p = .033, \text{Cohen’s } d = .47$). This provides support for our theorizing.

Process Measures. Participants who had the opportunity to sample were significantly less likely to complete their selected video. While 60.8% of participants watched this video in its entirety in the no-sampling condition, only 23.1% did so in the opportunity-to-sample condition ($\chi^2 = 12.73, p < .001$). Moreover, the opportunity to sample had a negative impact on our behavioral indicator of commitment to the selected video – participants who had the opportunity to sample watched a smaller portion of that video than did those who had no opportunity to sample ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = .78, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = .32$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = .51, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = .41$; $t(88) = 3.39, p = .001, \text{Cohen’s } d = .75$).

The opportunity to sample caused participants to have a more exploration-focused mindset during the video-watching activity, as indicated by their attaching greater importance to learning additional videos versus enjoying the selected one ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 5.49, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 3.65$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 7.59, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 2.51$; $t(88) = 3.24, p = .002, \text{Cohen’s } d = .68$). Finally, participants who had the opportunity to sample enjoyed the selected video less than those who
did not have the opportunity to sample ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 7.78, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 1.97$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 6.72, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 2.28; t(88) = 2.37, p = .020, \text{Cohen’s } d = .50$).

*Mediation Analysis.* To test our theorizing about the mechanism that underlies the adverse effect of the opportunity to sample candidate experiences on the overall hedonic value of an activity, we conducted a serial mediation analysis using a bootstrap approach with 5,000 samples. This analysis provides support for the hypothesized indirect pathway (see figure 2). The opportunity to sample promoted an exploration mindset ($\beta = 2.10, SE = .65, p = .001$), which undermined commitment to the selected video ($\beta = -.07, SE = .01, p < .001$). In turn, this led to reduced enjoyment of that video ($\beta = 2.38, SE = .55, p < .001$), which diminished the overall hedonic value of the video-watching activity ($\beta = .85, SE = .06, p < .001$). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for this indirect effect excludes zero (95% CI = [-.65, -.07]), indicating that this series of variables significantly mediates the negative effect of the opportunity to sample candidate experiences on overall hedonic value.
**FIGURE 2**

**MEDIATION MODEL (EXPERIMENT 1)**

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*Exploration Behavior.* There was no difference between conditions in the total amount of time\(^3\) (in seconds) participants spent on the video-watching activity ($M_{NoSampling} = 354.81$, $SD_{NoSampling} = 147.40$ vs. $M_{Sampling} = 356.55$, $SD_{Sampling} = 250.85$; $t(88) = 1.12$, NS, Cohen’s $d = .004$). However, participants who had the opportunity to sample spent more time exploring available videos ($M_{NoSampling} = 68.35$, $SD_{NoSampling} = 42.06$ vs. $M_{Sampling} = 159.74$, $SD_{Sampling} = 238.93$ vs.; $t(88) = 3.37$, $p = .001$, Cohen’s $d = .57$) but inspected fewer alternatives ($M_{NoSampling} = 9.45$, $SD_{NoSampling} = 1.42$ vs. $M_{Sampling} = 4.51$, $SD_{Sampling} = 3.60$; $t(88) = 3.37$, $p = .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.90$) than those who had no opportunity to sample. Compared to participants in the no-sampling condition, those in the opportunity-to-sample condition spent more time on each of the

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\(^3\) Since durations are inherently far from normally distributed (they have a lower bound of zero and no upper bound), we log-transformed all time-related variables for statistical analysis. However, we report the non-transformed mean values for ease of interpretation.
alternatives they explored ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 7.18$, $SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 4.23$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 27.11$, $SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 46.68$; $t(88) = 2.58$, $p = .01$, Cohen’s $d = .65$).

**Potential Alternative Explanations.** A plausible alternative account of the adverse effect of the opportunity to sample is that anticipating the sampling of candidate experiences might increase consumers’ confidence and expectations that they will be able to identify the best alternative. If consumers appraise an activity relative to what they anticipated it would be, the opportunity to sample could diminish the overall hedonic value of the activity. To examine this possible alternative account, we asked participants – just before they started the video-watching activity – to indicate how confident they were that they would identify the best video (0 = not confident at all, 10 = very confident) and how likely they thought they were to identify the best video (100-point probability scale). We found that the opportunity to sample did not have a significant effect on confidence ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 5.90$, $SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 2.39$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 6.74$, $SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 1.82$; $t(88) = -1.83$, NS, Cohen’s $d = -.39$), but that it did lead to a higher expected likelihood of identifying the best available alternative ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 52.76$, $SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 25.92$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 62.18$, $SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 18.85$; $t(88) = -2.00$, $p = .049$, Cohen’s $d = -.41$). Critically, however, neither the confidence nor the expectation measure predicted the hedonic value of the activity in a mediation model (bootstrap analysis; N = 5,000 samples; confidence: $\beta = -.06$, $SE = .10$, NS; 95% CI = [-.27, .15]; expectation: $\beta = .006$, $SE = .01$, NS; 95% CI = [-.01, .03]). Thus, potential explanations based on increased confidence or higher expectations cannot account for the detrimental impact of the opportunity to sample videos on the overall hedonic value of the video-watching activity.

**Discussion**

The findings of experiment 1 provide a first demonstration of the sampling trap. In particular, the opportunity to sample candidate experiences diminishes the overall hedonic value
of an activity. This adverse effect of the opportunity to sample operates through the promotion of an exploration mindset, which in turn reduces consumers’ commitment to and enjoyment of the experiences they select. Moreover, the results of this experiment also rule out potential alternative explanations in connection with consumers’ confidence and expectations.

The particular architecture for enabling consumers to sample experiences may vary. In the experimental paradigm we employed, a video started playing automatically, after a short delay, once participants had navigated to its description. This is currently the norm on many web sites that provide video content (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, BuzzFeed, and Netflix promotions). However, a reasonable alternative format is one where consumers initially only see a description of the video, and must take further action to initiate the sampling. To assess the robustness of the findings of experiment 1 to the particular sampling format employed, we ran a variant of it in which participants in the opportunity-to-sample condition had to actively initiate the sampling of a video by clicking a button (labeled “Play this Video”) on the screen that contained the video’s description. In all other respects, this experiment was identical to experiment 1. It was completed by a distinct sample of 81 individuals from the same research participation pool ($M_{\text{Age}} = 21.36, SD_{\text{Age}} = 1.70; 56.8\% \text{ females}$). The findings closely replicated those of experiment 1. First, the opportunity to sample again diminished the hedonic value of the video-watching activity ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 8.14, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 2.03 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{Sampling}} = 6.93, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 2.50; t(79) = 2.38, p = .020, \text{ Cohen’s } d = .51$). Moreover, it rendered participants less likely to complete their selected video (no-sampling condition: 71.1\%, opportunity-to-sample condition: 46.5\%; $\chi^2 = 4.99, p = .026$). Finally, the results of a serial mediation analysis are also consistent with those of experiment 1. The opportunity to sample promoted an exploration mindset ($\beta = 1.67, SE = .61, p = .01, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-2.89, -.46]$), which undermined commitment to the selected video ($\beta = - .04, SE = .02, p = .02, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.006, .07]$). In turn, this led to marginally lower enjoyment of that video...
(β = 1.12, SE = .58, p = .058, 95% CI = [-.04, 2.28]), which resulted in diminished overall hedonic value (β = .92, SE = .07, p < .001; 95% CI = [.78, 1.05]). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for this indirect effect excludes zero (95% CI = [-.29, - .002]), indicating a significant mediation effect. The results of this variant of experiment 1 suggest that the detrimental effect of the opportunity to sample experiences on hedonic value is robust and does not hinge on the particular format used for enabling consumers to sample.

**EXPERIMENT 2: DIVISIBLE EXPERIENCES**

The findings of experiment 1 show that offering consumers the opportunity to sample candidate experiences reduces the overall hedonic value of an activity. In our theorizing about the mechanism that underlies this sampling-trap effect, (lack of) commitment to the selected experience plays a pivotal role. In particular, the adverse effect of the opportunity to sample hinges on the notion that, for many types of experiences, disproportionate hedonic value arises specifically from completion (i.e., the consumption of an experience in its entirety and/or up to its natural end), and that failure to complete any of the available experiences is detrimental for hedonic value. This property, which we refer to as *indivisibility*, is inherent in many experiences. Indivisible experiences – such as movies – are cohesive in nature, and they follow a progressive course that culminates in a well-defined conclusion. By contrast, experiences that are divisible – such as stand-up comedy shows – consist of small independent parts, each of which is enjoyable in its own right. Divisible experiences can be highly enjoyable from moment to moment, even if they are not consumed in their entirety. Thus, we conceptualize the divisibility of experiences in terms of the extent to which they allow consumers to obtain hedonic values from partial consumption. We hypothesize that the divisibility of available experiences moderates the adverse effect of the opportunity to sample on the overall hedonic value of an activity. In particular, the opportunity to sample experiences should reduce hedonic value only when these experiences are
indivisible, but not when they are divisible. The objective of experiment 2 is to test this moderating role of divisibility.

**Method**

*Participants, Design, and Procedure.* A total of 194 members of a North American consumer panel \(M_{\text{Age}} = 33.88, SD_{\text{Age}} = 12.04; 46.0\% \text{ females}\) participated in this experiment in exchange for a nominal payment. Of these, seven were excluded from the data on the grounds that they did not correctly answer a set of multiple-choice questions designed to assess whether a participant understood the task instructions. Thus, the results are based on usable sample of 187 individuals. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (opportunity to sample: no vs. yes) x 2 (type of experiences: indivisible vs. divisible) between-subjects design. The procedure, including the manipulation of the opportunity to sample, was the same as that employed in experiment 1.

*Stimuli and Pretest.* Divisibility was manipulated via the set of 10 available animation videos. In the indivisible-experiences condition, all of these videos had cohesive storylines with enjoyable and/or surprising endings. By contrast, in the divisible-experiences condition, all 10 videos consisted of a number of brief, mostly independent segments, each of which was enjoyable in its own right.

The two sets of videos were selected based on a pretest that was designed to verify the (in)divisibility of two carefully selected sets of 10 videos, while ensuring that the sets differed only in terms of divisibility, and were comparable on other dimensions that might affect hedonic value. Each of 171 participants (recruited from the same panel) completed watching one of the 20 videos, which was assigned to them at random. First, participants indicated how interesting, enjoyable, boring, and impressive the video was that they had watched (11-point scales, 0 = not at all, 10 = very much). Indivisible and divisible videos were rated as being equally interesting
(\(M_{\text{indivisible}} = 8.16, SD_{\text{indivisible}} = 2.03\) vs. \(M_{\text{divisible}} = 7.79, SD_{\text{divisible}} = 2.61; t(169) = -1.03, NS,\)

Cohen’s \(d = .16\), enjoyable (\(M_{\text{indivisible}} = 8.27, SD_{\text{indivisible}} = 1.96\) vs. \(M_{\text{divisible}} = 8.45, SD_{\text{divisible}} = 2.10; t(169) = .59, NS, Cohen’s \(d = .09\)), boring (\(M_{\text{indivisible}} = 1.80, SD_{\text{indivisible}} = 2.15\) vs. \(M_{\text{divisible}} = 1.51, SD_{\text{divisible}} = 2.25; t(169) = -.85, NS, Cohen’s \(d = -.13\)), and impressive (\(M_{\text{indivisible}} = 7.42, SD_{\text{indivisible}} = 1.99\) vs. \(M_{\text{divisible}} = 7.68, SD_{\text{divisible}} = 2.08; t(169) = 1.07, NS, Cohen’s \(d = .13\)).

Critically, participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they would have enjoyed their video if they had not seen its end (11-point scale, 0 = not at all, 10 = very much). On average, the indivisible videos were rated as being significantly less enjoyable without their end than the divisible videos (\(M_{\text{indivisible}} = 5.47, SD_{\text{indivisible}} = 2.65\) vs. \(M_{\text{divisible}} = 6.33, SD_{\text{divisible}} = 2.77; t(169) = 2.07, p = .04, Cohen’s \(d = .32\)).

Measures. The same measures as in experiment 1 were obtained. The scale reliability of the items used to measure the hedonic value of the video-watching activity was .89.

**Results**

*Hedonic Value of the Video-Watching Activity.* An ANOVA with the hedonic value of the video-watching activity as the dependent variable revealed a significant interaction effect between the opportunity to sample and experience type (\(F(1, 183) = 5.06, p = .026, \eta^2 = .027\); see figure 3). An analysis of planned contrasts showed that the opportunity to sample reduced hedonic value for indivisible videos (\(M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 8.90, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 1.67\) vs. \(M_{\text{Sampling}} = 8.19, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 1.90\) vs.; \(t(183) = 2.02, p = .044, Cohen’s \(d = .40\)), but did not influence hedonic value for divisible videos (\(M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 8.36, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 1.86\) vs. \(M_{\text{Sampling}} = 8.80, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 1.44; t(80) = -1.18, NS, Cohen’s \(d = -.27\)).
**FIGURE 3**

**HEDONIC VALUE OF THE VIDEO-WATCHING ACTIVITY (EXPERIMENT 2)**

*Process Measures.* Regardless of divisibility, participants who had the opportunity to sample were less likely to complete their selected video ($\chi^2 = 9.82, p = .002$) (see Figure 4). The opportunity to sample also undermined commitment to selected videos – participants who did not have the opportunity to sample watched a greater proportion of their selected videos than those who did ($M_{No Sampling} = .89$, $SD_{No Sampling} = .27$ vs. $M_{Sampling} = .80$, $SD_{Sampling} = .32$; $t(185) = -2.02$, $p = .045$, Cohen’s $d = .30$), irrespective of whether the videos were divisible or indivisible (no main effect and no interaction, both $p$ values $>.3$).
FIGURE 4
PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO FAILED TO COMPLETE A VIDEO (EXPERIMENT 2)

The exploration-mindset measure indicated that participants who had the opportunity to sample candidate videos were more focused on exploring the set of available videos than those who did not have this opportunity ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 7.96$, $SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 2.78$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 8.67$, $SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 1.89$; $t(185) = -2.04$, $p = .043$, Cohen’s $d = .30$), irrespective of video divisibility (no main effect and no interaction, both $p$ values > .1).

Moderated Mediation Analysis. To pinpoint which part of the mechanism characterized in our theoretical model is affected by the divisibility of experiences, we conducted a serial mediation analysis (bootstrap approach with 5,000 samples) as we did for experiment 1, but with the critical addition of divisibility as a moderator of the effect of commitment to the selected video on enjoyment of that video (see figure 5). In support of our theorizing, the opportunity to sample promoted an exploration mindset ($\beta = .72$, $SE = .35$, $p = .04$), which in turn undermined
commitment to the selected video ($\beta = -.04$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$). As predicted, the effect of commitment on enjoyment was moderated by divisibility ($\beta = -.71$, $SE = .29$, $p < .01$) such that greater commitment led to greater enjoyment when the videos were indivisible ($\beta = 1.43$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$), but not when they were divisible ($\beta = -.48$, $SE = .32$, $NS$). Finally, enjoyment of the selected video had a positive effect on the overall hedonic value of the video-watching experience ($\beta = .85$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for this indirect effect excludes zero (95% CI = [-.14, -.004]), indicating a significant moderated meditational pathway.

**FIGURE 5**

MODERATED MEDIATION MODEL (EXPERIMENT 2)
**Exploration Behavior.** The total amount of time participants spent on the overall video-watching activity did not differ across conditions (no main effects and no interaction, all three $p$ values > .1). The same was true for the amount of time they spent exploring available videos (all three $p$ values > .1). However, participants who had the opportunity to sample explored fewer alternatives ($M_{NoSampling} = 6.48$, $SD_{NoSampling} = 3.69$ vs. $M_{Sampling} = 4.03$, $SD_{Sampling} = 3.45$; $F(1, 183) = 14.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .072$), regardless of divisibility (no main effect and no interaction, both $p$ values > .3). Finally, those in the opportunity-to-sample condition spent considerably more time (in seconds) on each of the alternatives they explored ($M_{NoSampling} = 111.99$, $SD_{NoSampling} = 119.32$ vs. $M_{Sampling} = 270.88$, $SD_{Sampling} = 843.67$; $F(1, 183) = 12.42$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .064$), irrespective of divisibility (no main effect and no interaction, both $p$ values > .1).

**Discussion**

In addition to providing a conceptual replication of the sampling-trap effect, the findings of experiment 2 identify a theoretically important boundary on this phenomenon by showing that the opportunity to sample is not detrimental to the overall hedonic value of an activity when the experiences are highly divisible. That is, when these candidate experiences consist of numerous independent portions each of which is enjoyable in its own right, the low commitment to any one of these experiences that results from the opportunity to sample does not adversely affect enjoyment.

**EXPERIMENT 3: ENFORCED COMPLETION**

The results of experiments 1 and 2 show that the opportunity to sample candidate experiences can have a detrimental impact on the hedonic value of an activity. One of the key findings is that, unless experiences are highly divisible, a consumer’s commitment to a selected experience (i.e., the extent to which s/he is determined to consume the experience in its entirety)
is a key driver of enjoyment. The objective of experiment 3 was to test this aspect of our theoretical framework directly. To that end, we manipulated commitment to selected experiences by either requiring participants to complete one of the candidate experiences or, as in the previous experiments, leaving up to them whether they did so. Based on our theorizing, enforcing completion of one of the experiences should attenuate the negative effect of the opportunity to sample on hedonic value.

**Method**

*Participants and Design.* A total of 211 members of a North American consumer panel ($M_{\text{Age}} = 33.64, SD_{\text{Age}} = 9.98; 41.2\%$ females) participated in this experiment in exchange for a nominal payment. Of these, 64 were excluded from the data on the grounds that they did not correctly answer a set of multiple-choice questions designed to assess whether a participant understood the task instructions. Thus, the results are based on usable sample of 147 individuals. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a $2$ (opportunity to sample: no vs. yes) x $2$ (completion: spontaneous vs. enforced) between-subjects design.

*Paradigm and Procedure.* The paradigm and procedures were based on those used in experiments 1 and 2. Participants were presented with a set of 10 indivisible videos, and they were instructed to select and watch the video they thought they would enjoy the most.

*Manipulations.* The opportunity to sample was manipulated in the same way as in the previous experiments. In the spontaneous-completion conditions, which resemble our standard paradigm, participants were free to stop the video-watching activity whenever they liked. In the enforced-completion conditions, participants were instructed that they had to watch one of the videos in its entirety before they were allowed to proceed to the next part of the study. Consistent with these instructions, the button for ending the video-watching activity only appeared on the screen once a participant had completed one of the videos.
Measures. The same measures as in experiments 1 and 2 were obtained. The scale reliability of the items used to measure the overall hedonic value of the video-watching activity was high (Cronbach’s alpha = .98). Moreover, to examine potential alternative explanations (see below for details), we measured decision difficulty and maximizing tendency. The former was captured by a three-item scale, with participants rating how difficult it was to decide which video to watch (0 = not at all, 10 = very difficult), how easy it was to compare available videos (0 = not at all, 10 = very easy, reverse coded), and how difficult it was to identify one’s preferred video (0 = not at all, 10 = very difficult, Cronbach’s alpha = .75). Participant’s acute maximizing tendency was measured based on a scale developed by Levav, Reinholtz, and Lin (2012) : “To what extent do you think the video you selected was the best one among the 10 that were available?” (0 = not at all, 10 = very much); “I made my decision as soon as I found a video that was good enough” (0 = strongly disagree, 10 = strongly agree, reverse coded), “Even if I found a video that I was relatively satisfied with, I still browsed other available videos before deciding” (0 = strongly disagree, 10 = strongly agree, Cronbach’s alpha = .78).

Results

Hedonic Value of the Video-Watching Activity. An ANOVA with the hedonic value of the video-watching activity as the dependent variable reveals a significant interaction between the opportunity to sample and the manipulation of completion (F(1, 143) = 4.98, p = .027, η² = .03) (see figure 6). In the spontaneous-completion conditions, the opportunity to sample reduced the overall hedonic value of the video-watching activity (M_{NoSampling} = 8.81, SD_{NoSampling} =1.51 vs. M_{Sampling} = 7.29, SD_{Sampling} = 2.60; t(143) = 2.76, p = .007, Cohen’s d = .72). However, when participants were required to complete one of the videos, the opportunity to sample did not influence the hedonic value of the video-watching activity (M_{NoSampling} = 7.73, SD_{NoSampling} =2.47 vs. M_{Sampling} = 7.89, SD_{Sampling} = 2.39; t(143) = -.32, NS, Cohen’s d = -.07). Thus, the detrimental
effect of the opportunity to sample candidate experiences on overall hedonic value vanished when completion of one of these experiences was enforced. This pattern of results pinpoints the reduction of commitment to one of the available experiences as a key component of the mechanism through which the opportunity to sample reduces hedonic value.

**FIGURE 6**

HEDONIC VALUE OF THE VIDEO-WATCHING ACTIVITY (EXPERIMENT 3)

*Completion Rate and Commitment to Selected Video.* In the spontaneous-completion conditions, the opportunity to sample rendered participants less likely to complete any one of videos (no-sampling: 94.4% vs. opportunity-to-sample: 57.6%; $\chi^2 = 13.14, p < .01$). Moreover, the opportunity to sample also undermined participants’ commitment to their selected videos in the spontaneous-completion conditions ($M_{NoSampling} = .96$, $SD_{NoSampling} = .17$ vs. $M_{Sampling} = .70$, $SD_{Sampling} = .40$; $t(143) = -3.56, p = .001$, Cohen’s $d = .85$).

*Exploration Behavior.* The manipulations of the opportunity to sample and enforced completion had a significant interactive influence on the total amount of time participants spent
on the video-watching activity (in seconds; \(F(1, 143) = 4.45, p = .037, \eta^2 = .03\)). In the spontaneous-completion conditions, the opportunity to sample caused participants to spend more time on this activity (\(M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 356.28\); \(SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 165.08\) vs. \(M_{\text{Sampling}} = 443.16\), \(SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 119.65\); \(t(143) = 2.83, p = .03\), Cohen’s \(d = .60\)), whereas it had no such effect when completion was enforced (\(M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 517.96\), \(SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 335.92\) vs. \(M_{\text{Sampling}} = 477.20\), \(SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 110.47\); \(t(143) = -.07\), NS, Cohen’s \(d = -.16\)). Moreover, consistent with the findings of the previous experiments, the opportunity to sample resulted in more time spent exploring candidate videos overall (\(M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 443.86\); \(SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 281.52\) vs. \(M_{\text{Sampling}} = 460.86\), \(SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 115.46\); \(F(1, 143) = 10.80, p = .001, \eta^2 = .07\)), fewer inspected alternatives (\(M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 8.39\); \(SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 2.67\) vs. \(M_{\text{Sampling}} = 5.35\), \(SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 3.81\); \(F(1, 143) = 32.45, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19\)), and more time per candidate video (\(M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 17.24\); \(SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 33.77\) vs. \(M_{\text{Sampling}} = 8.46\), \(SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 12.35\); \(F(1, 143) = 6.24, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04\)), irrespective of whether completion was enforced.

**Potential Alternative Explanations.** This experiment ruled out two potential alternative explanations of the adverse effect of the opportunity to sample on overall hedonic value. First, experiences are inherently subjective and ambiguous, and therefore difficult to evaluate or compare (Carter and Gilovich 2010; Hoch and Ha 1986). Thus, the opportunity to sample may increase the difficulty of selecting one’s preferred experience, which could in turn contaminate the hedonic value of an activity. This account would predict that the opportunity to sample should have a detrimental impact on hedonic value irrespective of whether participants are required to watch one of the videos in its entirety. However, the results of experiment 3 show that the opportunity to sample diminishes hedonic value only for spontaneous completion, but not for enforced completion. In addition, the opportunity to sample did not influence decision difficulty.
– neither as a main effect \( F(1,143) = .002, NS, \eta^2 < .001 \) nor interactively with enforced completion \( F(1,143) = .14, NS, \eta^2 = .001 \). Thus, we can rule out an increase in decision difficulty as a result of having the opportunity to sample as a potential alternative explanation of the latter’s detrimental effect on hedonic value.

Another potential alternative explanation is that the opportunity to sample could promote a maximizing mindset, which in turn reduces hedonic enjoyment. Since consumers might expect (perhaps falsely) that sampling will enable them to better assess how enjoyable different experiences might be, it could motivate them to identify the best alternative. Consumers in a maximizing mindset aim for the best, instead of settling for a good-enough alternative (i.e., satisficing mindset). Consequently, a maximizing mindset might reduce the hedonic value of an activity by giving rise to feelings of regret and dissatisfaction when the experience that is ultimately selected does not meet one’s expectations (Iyengar, Wells, and Schwartz 2006; Ma and Roese 2014). However, the results of this experiment did not reveal any influence of the opportunity to sample on participants’ maximizing tendency – neither as a main effect \( F(1, 143) = .002, NS, \eta^2 < .001 \) nor interactively with enforced completion \( F(1, 143) = .14, NS, \eta^2 = .001 \), ruling out a shift towards a maximizing mindset as a potential explanation of the effect of the opportunity to sample experiences on hedonic value.

**Discussion**

The findings of experiment 3 corroborate those of the earlier experiments in that they offer further evidence of the adverse consequences of the opportunity to sample candidate experiences for consumption enjoyment. Moreover, they provide a direct test of our theorizing about the pivotal role of consumers’ commitment to a selected experience. The results show that the detrimental impact of the opportunity to sample on hedonic value hinges on consumers being free to end an activity when they so desire (which is the norm for most hedonic experiences), and
that this effect vanishes in the presence of a heavy-handed restriction that requires individuals to consume one of the candidate experiences in its entirety. Thus, if completion of an experience is externally enforced, consumers tend not to get trapped in a mental state characterized by over-exploration and a failure to commit to any of the candidate experiences. Finally, the results of this experiment rule out two potential alternative explanations – based on decision difficulty and maximizing tendency – of the negative effect of the opportunity to sample on hedonic value.

**EXPERIMENT 4: SAMPLING WITH COMMITMENT**

According to our theorizing, the opportunity to sample candidate experiences undermines consumers’ commitment to any of these alternatives. In experiment 3, we used a rather heavy-handed intervention that forced participants to ultimately commit to one of the available experiences and consume it in its entirety. However, our conceptualization of a sampling trap entails a psychological dynamic whereby an exploration mindset is activated and consumers then gradually lose sight of the need to commit to one of the candidate experiences as they sample. In other words, the boundary between (1) the search for what to consume and (2) the actual consumption of a selected alternative becomes blurred, and the decision to commit to an alternative is deferred – potentially indefinitely. Therefore, a subtle nudge that merely reminds individuals that they ought to, at some point, stop sampling and commit to one of the available experiences should also mitigate the detrimental effect of the opportunity to sample on hedonic value. Experiment 4 was designed to test this prediction. The subtle intervention that we implemented was to softly partition the overall activity into a pre-commitment and a post-commitment phase by merely providing individuals with the opportunity to indicate, whenever they felt ready to do so, which of the alternatives they wished to consume. Critically, in this experiment, it was not mandatory for participants to ever commit to one of the candidate
experiences, nor were they required to consume an experience in its entirety (unlike in experiment 3).

Method

Participants and Design. A total of 164 members of a North American consumer panel ($M_{Age} = 34.23, SD_{Age} = 10.72; 44.9\%$ females) participated in this experiment in exchange for a nominal payment. Of these, 34 were excluded from the data on the grounds that they did not correctly answer a set of multiple-choice questions designed to assess whether a participant understood the task instructions. Thus, the results are based on usable sample of 130 individuals. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions – a no-sampling condition, an opportunity-to-sample condition (as in the previous experiments), or a new “sampling-with-commitment” condition.

Procedure and Manipulations. The overall procedure and the basic manipulation of the opportunity to sample were the same as in the previous experiments. In the sampling-with-commitment condition, participants could freely sample as many videos as they wished (as in the opportunity-to-sample condition). However, a button labeled “Watch this Video” was displayed on the screen as they were sampling, and participants were encouraged to click it whenever they felt they were ready commit to one of the alternatives. Once they clicked this button, the current video continued to play, but the option to switch to another video was removed. Participants were free to exit the video-watching activity whenever they liked.

Measures. The same measures as in experiments 1 and 2 were obtained. The scale reliability of the items used to measure the hedonic value of the video-watching activity was .97.

Results

Hedonic Value of the Video-Watching Activity. An ANOVA indicated significant effect of the opportunity to sample on the overall hedonic value of the video-watching activity ($F(2, 127)$
= 4.68, \( p = .011, \eta^2 = .07 \). In line with the results of the previous experiments, the (standard) opportunity to sample reduced hedonic value \( (M_{NoSampling} = 8.85, SD_{NoSampling} = 1.63 \text{ vs. } M_{Sampling} = 7.85, SD_{Sampling} = 2.67; t(127) = 2.46, p = .015, \text{ Cohen’s } d = .45 \). More importantly, nudging participants to indicate their commitment to a particular video while sampling significantly enhanced the hedonic value of the video-watching activity relative to the opportunity-to-sample condition \( (M_{Commitment} = 9.09, SD_{Commitment} = 1.19; t(127) = -2.73, p = .007, \text{ Cohen’s } d = .60 \). Indeed, participants in the sampling-with-commitment condition enjoyed the overall activity as much as those in the no-sampling condition \( (t(127) = -.54, \text{ NS, Cohen’s } d = .17 \). Thus, prompting participants to indicate their commitment to a particular video, thereby partitioning the video-watching activity into a pre-commitment and a post-commitment phase, allowed them to reap the benefits of sampling while sidestepping the detrimental hedonic consequences of getting trapped in a state of over-exploration and lack of commitment.

**Completion Rate and Commitment to Selected Video.** Consistent with the evidence from the previous experiments, participants who had the opportunity to sample were less likely to complete their selected videos (no-sampling: 85.7% vs. opportunity-to-sample: 61.2%; \( \chi^2 = 7.54, p = .006 \). Nudging participants to indicate their commitment significantly increased the likelihood of completing their selected videos (96.9%; \( \chi^2 = 13.23, p < .001 \)). Moreover, as in the previous experiments, the opportunity to sample undermined participants’ commitment to selected videos \( (M_{NoSampling} = .93, SD_{NoSampling} = .21 \text{ vs. } M_{Sampling} = .74, SD_{Sampling} = .38; t(127) = 3.21, p = .002, \text{ Cohen’s } d = .62 \). Critically, in the sampling-with-commitment condition, commitment to selected videos was significantly greater than in the standard opportunity-to-sample condition \( (M_{Commitment} = .97, SD_{Commitment} = .17; t(127) = -3.56, p = .001, \text{ Cohen’s } d = .78 \), and no different from that in the no-sampling condition \( (t(127) = -.70, \text{ NS, Cohen’s } d = .21 \).
**Exploration Behavior.** In this experiment, participants spent similar amounts of time on the overall video-watching activity ($F(2, 127) = .40, \text{NS}, \eta^2 = .006$) and on the exploration of available videos ($F(2, 127) = 2.83, \text{NS}, \eta^2 = .043$) across conditions. Consistent with the results of the previous experiments, participants who had the opportunity to sample inspected fewer alternatives ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 8.08, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 3.26$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 5.56, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 3.71$; $t(127) = 3.62, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = .72$) but spent more time on each alternative ($M_{\text{NoSampling}} = 78.96, SD_{\text{NoSampling}} = 76.68$ vs. $M_{\text{Sampling}} = 149.20, SD_{\text{Sampling}} = 139.15$; $t(127) = -3.01, p = .003$, Cohen’s $d = -.63$). Participants in the sampling-with-commitment condition also inspected fewer alternatives ($M_{\text{Commitment}} = 6.34, SD_{\text{Commitment}} = 3.36$; $t(127) = 2.21, p = .03$, Cohen’s $d = 53$) and spent more time on each alternative ($M_{\text{Commitment}} = 121.95, SD_{\text{Commitment}} = 116.71$; $t(127) = -2.17, p = .03$, Cohen’s $d = -.44$) than those in the no-sampling condition, and they did not differ from those in the (standard) opportunity-to-sample condition on either of these measures.

**Discussion**

The findings of experiment 4 shed additional light on the psychological dynamics that govern the sampling-trap effect. They provide further evidence that the opportunity to sample experiences lures consumers into a mental state characterized by over-exploration and a failure to commit to any of the available alternatives, but they also show that a subtle nudge that serves as a reminder to eventually commit to an alternative can help consumers sidestep the sampling trap and its detrimental hedonic consequences. Such a nudge, in effect, encourages consumers to mentally partition an activity into a pre-commitment and a post-commitment phase, enabling them to take advantage of the opportunity to sample in identifying experiences that are enjoyable to them without losing sight of the importance of ultimately moving beyond the exploration of various candidate experiences and committing to the consumption of one of these.
GENERAL DISCUSSION

This paper examines the hedonic consequences of the opportunity to sample in consumer search for experiences. Although consumers generally value the freedom to sample candidate experiences, the evidence presented here shows that such freedom tends to backfire and reduce the hedonic value of an activity. In particular, our findings demonstrate a “sampling trap” whereby the opportunity to sample promotes an exploration mindset, which reduces commitment to and enjoyment of selected experiences, ultimately diminishing the overall hedonic value of an activity (experiments 1 and 2). However, these dynamics do not result in diminished hedonic value when the candidate experiences are highly divisible, in which case the reduced commitment to any one of the experiences does not jeopardize enjoyment (experiment 2). We have pinpointed the pivotal role of consumers’ commitment to selected experiences in connection with the sampling-trap effect both through mediation analyses (experiments 1 and 2) and by demonstrating theory-inspired boundary conditions (experiments 3 and 4).

The theoretical framework and body of empirical evidence presented here advance our understanding of the opportunity to sample in the context of consumer search for experiences, including its hedonic consequences and the associated psychological dynamics. This research contributes to the literature in several ways.

First, the present work identifies an important factor that contributes to hedonic value in consumer search for experiences. Prior research has examined the hedonic consequences of various factors when consumers are exploring available alternatives. For instance, consumers are less satisfied with an activity when they experience difficulty in comparing available alternatives (Griffin and Broniarczyk 2010; Gu, Botti, and Faro 2013), when they are motivated to identify the best alternative (Iyengar, Wells, and Schwartz 2006; Ma and Roese 2014), and when expectations of identifying an attractive alternative are elevated by increased assortment size or
sequential presentation (Mogilner, Shiv, and Iyengar 2013; Diehl and Poynor 2010). The current work identifies a novel factor that diminishes the overall hedonic value of experiential consumption – the opportunity to sample candidate experiences before committing to one of them. Notwithstanding the well-documented benefits of product sampling (Smith and Swinyard 1988; Marks and Kamins 1988; Hoch and Deighton 1989; Wright and Lynch 1995; Hamilton and Thompson 2007), this research examines the psychological consequences of the opportunity to sample experiences. Although the opportunity to sample allows consumers to better assess available alternatives (than is possible from descriptive information alone), it promotes an exploration mindset, which reduces the enjoyment of and commitment to selected experiences, ultimately diminishing the overall hedonic value of an activity.

Second, this research contributes to the search literature by examining a new dimension of freedom (i.e., the depth of search) in consumer search for experiences. Prior research has approached the freedom to search from the perspective of breadth – i.e., the number of alternatives that consumers inspect or that are available to them. The breadth of search tends to adversely affect decision quality and decision satisfaction (Botti and Hsee 2010; Diehl and Zauberman 2005). The present work approaches the freedom to search from the perspective of depth, whereby consumers have the opportunity to sample candidate experiences, which allows them to acquire in-depth information of them, as an alternative to searching a larger number of alternatives in a shallow manner. Our findings show that, controlling for the number of available alternatives, greater depth of search tends to backfire, reducing the enjoyment of a hedonic activity.

Third, by introducing the notion of an exploration mindset, this research contributes to the search and mindset literature, as it identifies a novel and important psychological construct in consumer search for experiences. Prior work discusses the exploration as the process of
identifying available yet unknown resources, solutions, activities, or information (Cohen, McClure, and Yu 2007; Hills, Todd, and Goldstone 2010; Wilson et al. 2014). When the opportunity to sample candidate experiences is available, an exploration mindset, which is defined as a momentary mental predisposition geared towards discovering a broader set of alternatives at the expense of engaging with a single alternative in greater depth, undermines consumers’ commitment to selected experiences. In this paper, we advance the understanding of this psychological construct through identifying an antecedent (i.e., the opportunity to sample) and important downstream consequences (i.e., reducing both commitment to selected experiences and overall hedonic enjoyment) of an exploration mindset in consumer search for experiences.

The insights from this work have important practical implications for both firms and consumers. First, they show that while sampling tends be unproblematic for experiences that are highly divisible, it clearly diminishes hedonic value when candidate experiences are indivisible. Thus, consumers should be aware of the risk of getting trapped in a state of exploration when provided with opportunities to sample (indivisible) experiences, which might ultimately reduce their consumption enjoyment. Similarly, firms who seek to optimize customer experience ought to take this sampling-trap effect into account when deciding whether and how to allow consumers to sample. Moreover, our findings identify an intervention that can help consumers sidestep this trap. Specifically, combining the opportunity to sample with a nudge that encourages consumers to partition an activity into a pre-commitment and a post-commitment phase renders them more likely to complete one of the candidate experiences, in turn enhancing overall enjoyment.

It is worth pointing out that this research examines the sampling-trap effect in a conservative manner. In reality, opportunities to sample experiences often arise in settings where time constraints amplify the trap – such as when exploring options for in-flight entertainment or different hiking trails, with the end of the flight or the end of the day limiting the time window
that is available for consuming any one of the candidate experiences in its entirety. To examine
the robustness of the findings reported here, we ran variants of experiments 2 and 3 with the only
modification that the overall duration of the video-watching activity was fixed at 10 minutes. The
results led to the same substantive conclusions as the original experiments (details are available
upon request). These two replication experiments provide evidence of the generalizability of the
sampling-trap effect across different settings.

CONCLUSION

Opportunities for consumers to sample candidate experiences are ubiquitous. The present
research shows that while consumers are inclined to take advantage of opportunities to sample
experiences, doing so tends to trap them in a mental state characterized by an exploration
mindset, which results in lower commitment to specific experiences, ultimately reducing the
hedonic value they derive from activities.
DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author designed the experiments with feedback from the second author. The first author collected all the data, including experiment 1 (September and October 2014) in at the Behavioral Research Lab at University of Alberta, and the pretest of experiment 2 (October 2014), experiment 2 (October and November 2014), experiment 3 (May 2015) and experiment 4 (April 2015) on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. All the data analysis was performed by the first author and was discussed with the second author throughout the research program.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A:

EXPERIMENTAL PARADIGM (SAMPLE SCREENSHOTS)

FIGURE A-1

NO-SAMPLING CONDITION

Click the green navigation (Forward and Back) buttons below to move between the descriptions of the 10 videos.

Once you have chosen your preferred video and are ready to begin watching it, click the "Watch this Video" button below its description.

Johnny Express (2006)

**Director:** Gary Rydstrom

**Storyline:** It's 2150, and there are all sorts of Aliens living throughout space. Johnny is a space delivery man who travels to different planets to deliver packages. Johnny is lazy and his only desire is to sleep in his autopilot spaceship. However, things never go as planned. Johnny also visits strange and bizarre planets...

[Watch this Video]
FIGURE A-2

OPPORTUNITY-TO-SAMPLE CONDITION

Click the green navigation (Forward and Back) buttons below to move between the descriptions of the 10 videos. You can switch to another video at any time using the green buttons.

Johnny Express (2006)

Director: Gary Rydstrom

Storyline: It's 2150, and there are all sorts of Aliens living throughout space. Johnny is a space delivery man who travels to different planets to deliver packages. Johnny is lazy and his only desire is to sleep in his autopilot spaceship. However, things never go as planned. Johnny also visits strange and bizarre planets...

I'm Done With the Video-Watching Part of the Study
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3) Procedure and Manipulations
3) Measures
2) Results
3) Hedonic Value of the Video-Watching Activity
3) Completion Rate and Commitment to Selected Video
3) Exploration Behavior
2) Discussion

1) GENERAL DISCUSSION

1) CONCLUSION

1) REFERENCES

1) APPENDIX A: EXPERIMENTAL PARADIGM (SAMPLE SCREENSHOTS)